

# COVID-19 and the work of trade unions: new challenges, adaptation and renewal

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## Abstract

Trade unions face long-term challenges that threaten their influence and legitimacy. A rich literature on union renewal shows how unions have sought to meet challenges that include declining membership and a fast-changing world of work being shaped by digitalisation, demographic shifts and climate change. COVID-19 creates new challenges of steep recessions and significant changes to working life. Will the pandemic accelerate union decline or encourage reforms leading to renewal? This paper addresses that question. It presents evidence from a 2020 study that found unions making rapid changes to adapt to new circumstances and argues that union renewal should be investigated and understood as a process of transition. Through analysis of UK unions, it contributes new insights demonstrating that renewal can occur in an economic downturn and where unfavourable institutional arrangements exist. It argues that changes made by unions during the pandemic highlight new possibilities for renewal and post-COVID social dialogue.

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## **COVID-19 and the work of trade unions: new challenges, adaptation and renewal**

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Trade unions around the world face long-term challenges to their relevance, influence and legitimacy. Against a backdrop of declining membership and collective bargaining coverage over the last 40 years, unions in 2021 seek to represent workers in a rapidly-changing world of work that is being shaped by megatrends including digitalisation, demographic shifts and climate change (ILO, 2019). Calls for unions to modernise if they are to reverse long-term decline and meet the new challenges workers face come from employers and from within the union movement alike (Salmon, 2020; Arnold, 2018); the blunt warning of 'change or die' is prominent (Topping, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges. Will the profound changes to working life and steep recessions that the pandemic has triggered accelerate trends of union decline or encourage reforms that contribute to union renewal? This paper addresses that question. It presents new evidence from a study conducted in 2020 that explored the impact of the pandemic on the work of trade unions and found unions making rapid changes to how they operate to adapt to the new circumstances created by the pandemic. The paper contributes new insights about union renewal and makes a fresh case supported by new empirical evidence for why renewal should be understood as a process of transition. Through its analysis of unions in the UK, the paper further contributes by presenting evidence that suggests, contrary to previous studies, union renewal is possible in the challenging context of both an economic downturn and where unions operate with unfavourable institutional arrangements.

Three decades of scholarship on union renewal has provided extensive insights into the scale of the challenges facing unions, how renewal can be achieved and in what circumstances (Murray, 2017). Whilst different industrial relations frameworks and institutional arrangements mean that union 'decline' and 'renewal' can have different meanings in different countries (Frege and Kelly, 2003), membership density is a widely-recognised metric of both and a key indicator of unions' strength and influence. This is particularly true in liberal-market economies such as the UK where, in contrast to other European countries, unions have had hostile legislative curbs placed on their activity and operate in a context in which 'given the absence

or weakening of institutional support, they are also largely dependent on their ability to organise new members' (Murray, 2017: 10).

Research on the relationship between unionisation and the business cycle has found union growth to be procyclical: in many countries employment growth leads to union membership growth and rising unemployment reduces growth and density (Schnabel, 2013: 258). However, others argue that growth is more dependent on the institutional context than the business cycle (Western, 1997). Analysis of declining membership density in the US since the 1980s finds 'no apparent relationship to the business cycle' (Milkman and Luce, 2017: 149). A trend of long-term decline through periods of economic growth and recessions since the 1980s is similarly found in the UK. In short, as the pandemic struck and led to the UK experiencing in 2020 its worst economic performance for over 300 years (Romei and Giles, 2021), one might reasonably conclude it was not a propitious context for processes of union renewal to occur; not least with the new challenges created by the pandemic adding to pre-existing challenges facing unions such as aging memberships, the growth of atypical forms of employment and low private sector density.

Yet, despite this, union membership in the UK rose by 118,000 in 2020, the fourth consecutive annual increase (BEIS, 2021). This rise corroborates evidence from the study which found unions reporting membership growth with some forecasting large annual increases. Moreover, it reinforces a central finding of the study which is that the pandemic engendered a strong sense of optimism and confidence amongst union officials (paid staff and lay workplace representatives). This is illustrated by 70 per cent of officials who responded to a survey completed during the study stating that they believed their union was stronger than before the pandemic; a belief that was in part attributed to membership growth. Rising membership and new-found optimism in a context when neither might be expected presents a puzzle for scholars: what is causing this and what does it tell us about union renewal?

Many studies of union renewal and theorisation about renewal derive their insights from analysing long-run processes of change; this paper does the opposite. It makes a new contribution to the literature by presenting evidence from a recent period in the current pandemic. The paper argues that the pandemic led to significant and rapid transformations in how unions operate, with new forms of member engagement, training, recruitment, representation, governance and negotiations taking place, and it shows how unions embraced new ways of working, including widespread adaptation to remote working and adoption of

digital tools. As one interviewee put it, “*we have in effect turned our organization inside out*”. It argues that the crisis led unions to make changes through necessity and often not as a result of strategic decision-making processes. Whilst it remains unclear whether such changes will be permanent or temporary, Lévesque and Murray’s (2010) framework for evaluating union capacity is used to assess the impact of the changes on unions’ power resources and strategic capabilities. As such, it argues that the changes made led to increased capacity and show an ability by unions to rapidly adapt, thus questioning the notion that unions are unable to reform (Taylor, 2005). The paper’s new data and analysis supports the thesis advanced by Fairbrother (2015) that union renewal should be investigated and understood as a ‘process of transition’. It further makes a fresh intervention by arguing that the renewed confidence amongst unions observed in the study is an important factor in understanding processes of renewal and should be a focus for further academic inquiry.

The paper draws its conclusions from two new sources of primary data collected between October and December 2020: 1) 149 union staff members from 33 unions responded to an online survey that investigated how the pandemic affected their work and the work of their union; 2) 27 in-depth interviews with union officials including senior leaders (General Secretaries, Chiefs of Staff, Heads of Organising), mid-level officials (Training Managers, Directors of Policy) and regional and workplace organisers. The majority of contributors were from UK unions, but officials from Australia, Belgium, Ireland, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Sweden and the USA also participated. Officials from unions representing workers in sectors including the creative industries, education, energy, financial services, health and social care, manufacturing, public administration and transportation contributed.

The paper begins with a short discussion of the literature on union renewal, noting key interventions and how this paper contributes. The findings of the study are then presented, first with a discussion of the pandemic’s impact upon the locations from where union activity is organised, focusing on remote working, before considering changes to six features of union activity: member engagement; recruitment and retention; training members and supporting workplace representatives; advocacy and influencing; representing members, and governance and democracy. A discussion section explores the findings’ contribution to our understanding of union renewal and their potential implications for unions post-pandemic. A brief conclusion ends the paper.

## Understanding union renewal

A rich literature on union renewal demonstrates how unions have sought to meet challenges facing them. In a review of studies conducted during the last 30 years, Murray concludes that renewal comes through 'rigorous democratic experimentalism' but that there are no easy answers (2017: 23) and argues renewal should be understood in those terms. The evidence presented in this paper supports that argument: the pandemic created opportunities for experimentation, although whether they will prove successful or lead to permanent change is moot.

Murray also highlights the crucial role of 'strategic capabilities' and the need for unions to develop such capabilities to have sufficient capacity to enable experimentation. In an earlier contribution Lévesque and Murray (2010) outline a framework for assessing the power resources and strategic capabilities needed to build capacity. This important contribution renders explicit that to understand processes of renewal requires considering which choices have been made and which priorities set. Key questions for scholars investigating union renewal thus include: which challenges are unions seeking to meet, what opportunities have been identified and how are resources deployed accordingly? This paper's analysis is guided by such questions which we can also observe in Visser's contribution (2019) which asks 'can unions revitalize themselves?' Answering with a qualified yes, 'but only if they rejuvenate and put resources and new thinking into making it attractive for young people to join', Visser's conclusion indicates how renewal requires choosing to prioritise certain groups or activities over others (2019: 42).

Heery's study (2005) of sources of change in unions assesses the internal and external pressures that paid union officials face when determining which groups of workers to focus organising activities upon. The findings presented in this paper are similarly drawn by surveying union staff who are, as Heery notes, 'a key group of representatives within unions, with a prime responsibility for organizing and bargaining' (2005: 94). By examining the role of internal actors within unions and the specific actions they take and are able to take, debates about union strategy and capacity are translated from theory to practice. In a contribution that interrogates 'the meaning of strategy in the trade union context' (2007: 195), Hyman concludes that strategic capacity is a product of both leadership and internal democracy (2007: 203). Identifying processes of internal dialogue, discussion and debate as important for enhancing strategic capacity, his analysis encourages inquiry to gain insights about such processes; a

call this paper seeks to meet by providing new evidence about how unions' democratic and governance processes functioned during the pandemic.

By presenting evidence about union activities during a discrete time-period and specific crisis context, the paper contributes new insights about union renewal but seeks to avoid adding to the 'jungle of individual interpretations' about trade unionism that Perlman critiques (1976: x). Citing Perlman, Hodder and Edwards (2015) set out to 'make sense of this jungle' by proposing a new framework to understand the essence of trade unions (2015: 844). Their framework offers a new perspective on understanding how union identity, purpose and ideology interact and shape each other. Just as union activity constantly evolves, their framework is similarly 'not static and can be subject to change as a result of different actions by the state, capital and unions themselves' (2015: 849).

The dynamic essence of trade unionism underpinning Hodder and Edwards' framework is similarly found in Fairbrother's contribution (2015) which argues that union renewal should be examined as a process of transition. A sense of transition runs through the findings in this paper and shaped the context of the study that provides them. Whilst processes of change within unions may follow well-established plans developed deliberately and made possible through long-term cultivation of union capacity, new events and shocks can emerge unexpectedly to derail such plans and demand immediate and new responses. A virus emerging in one city in January 2020 that by mid-March had led to a global pandemic being declared was one such event. This was the starting point for the inquiry undertaken in late 2020 which set out to investigate the question: when large parts of economies shut down, when going to work became a matter of life and death, and when work for millions of people moved into their homes, how did unions operate and did changes to their work take place? Its findings, which now follow, contribute new evidence to help answer that question and new insights about union renewal.

### **'We just had to do it': adaptation and learning**

Drawing on new survey and interview data and focusing on the UK, this section identifies the key adaptations made by unions in response to the new challenges created by the pandemic, and presents evidence about the learning and reflection taking place within unions in response

to those adaptations. Evidence about unions' adaptation to remote working is presented before exploring how activities relating to six interconnected elements of trade unions' work were conducted during the pandemic.

Before assessing these specific changes made by unions it is important to note a highly significant change to public policy instigated by the UK union movement that occurred as the pandemic began in March 2020. The government's introduction of the Job Retention or 'furlough' scheme was directly negotiated by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) with HM Treasury. At its height, the furlough scheme supported 8.9 million jobs, preventing the steep rise in unemployment experienced elsewhere, notably in the US, as lockdowns took effect. The introduction of the scheme, together with early demands by unions, beginning in February 2020, for greater levels of personal protection equipment (PPE) and higher sick-pay for workers, formed a foundational narrative within union about their critical early actions to protect lives and livelihoods in the pandemic, counterposed against perceived inaction and delay by the government and employers. This narrative framed much of the activity described below and is a key source of the confidence and optimism that many of the participants in the research expressed about the contribution that their union, and unions collectively, was making. The wider implications of the furlough scheme for union renewal and post-pandemic social dialogue are discussed in the final section.

### ***Adapting to remote working***

As lockdowns began and work from home guidance was issued, unions quickly closed offices and staff began working remotely. 57% of survey respondents reported solely working from home since March 2020 with a further 40% of respondents having worked at home for some of that period. Most paid officials and lay representatives previously worked from union offices or their own workplaces so this represented a significant change to how unions operate. Nearly all of the evidence presented in this paper about union activity during the pandemic was either planned or implemented by officials working at home, often for the first time and in new ways. This shift required rapid adaptation for union activities to be able to continue and it bred confidence amongst officials, as discussed later, about the ability of their union to adapt quickly to new circumstances.

Remote working required officials to learn how to use video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, which were infrequently used pre-pandemic but quickly became essential for communicating with colleagues and members. When asked if the pandemic had



changed how they do their job, 72% of survey respondents said there had been significant changes with just 1% reporting no change. When asked to explain those changes, most respondents referenced the replacement of face-to-face meetings and activities with video calls and higher email volumes. Remote working also involved establishing new formal interactions between colleagues such as online team meetings and new informal communication methods such as staff Whatsapp groups. The latter is seen as particularly important to counter some of the disadvantages of remote working which a high number of research participants raised. These include the erosion of 'bonds' between colleagues, greater difficulty of resolving interpersonal conflicts and a sense that outside of an office environment officials had become less aware of what was happening in the wider organisation beyond their immediate work group.

In keeping with many office-based organisations, officials reported that their union had begun to evaluate the size of their physical estate and whether more flexible forms of working should be implemented post-pandemic. One senior official in a national role with responsibility for strategy described how *"[we are] using the crisis if you like to accelerate some of the things that we might well have ended up doing in two or three years time but doing it now. We will be quite a different kind of organization in 12 months time I suspect."* Cost savings associated with reduced travel and rent are influential factors in such discussions, as is a newly-gained awareness that some officials may work more effectively when not wholly office-based. However, senior leaders also acknowledged the downsides of remote working particularly for staff with caring responsibilities and junior colleagues who miss out on the informal learning gained in office environments. They also acknowledged the increased risk of reduced staff wellbeing due to isolation and overwork; the latter is reflected in survey evidence. 55% of respondents reported working more hours than usual since March 2020.

Examining how unions adapted to remote working is instructive because it reveals multiple processes of adaptation and learning simultaneously taking place: immediate adaptation to new circumstances, often through necessity; iterative and quick evaluation of those adaptations, often leading to further changes to encourage better outcomes and more effective processes, and reflection that adaptations being made would require more considered evaluation if they are to lead to longer-term change. These processes and feedback loops can be observed across all areas of union activity during the pandemic, although unevenly within unions.



### **Member engagement**

A consistent finding running through the study is that higher levels of engagement with members had taken place during the pandemic and in new ways. With face-to-face interactions limited, unions experimented with new online forms of engagement.

As the pandemic began, unions quickly increased their use of 'all-member' emails; an action taken for two reasons. First, from February 2020 onwards, large numbers of members turned to unions for advice and guidance. An official described how their 'key worker' members "*can't watch the nightly news... so our role increased to pass on what the government messages were, and refining them down to what they actually meant to them*". All-member emails were therefore used to provide members with clear information and advice about COVID-19. Second, all-member emails were used to gather information about the new circumstances members were experiencing. Online surveys were widely used and officials reported high response rates which enabled them to use the data to effectively inform campaign planning and negotiations with employers.

Officials also reported that their union was investing in digital technologies and systems to increase and improve engagement with members. This included procuring webinar infrastructures, upgrading email systems and commissioning new websites. Union branch meetings moved online using video conferencing platforms and were widely reported to have higher attendance than equivalent pre-pandemic in-person meetings. A widespread view was that online meetings are easier for the 'usually silent majority' to attend meaning that a broader range of members was being heard from. Similarly, officials described being able to 'visit' more workplaces by using video conferencing tools which provided greater capacity to engage with more members compared to pre-pandemic.

The study found widespread recognition amongst officials that greater member engagement was enabling deeper understanding of the conditions and challenges being experienced by members and building capacity. Recognition of the value of this is prompting reflection about further long-term adaptations. One senior leader outlined how their union was rethinking its organising strategy:

*"We're not just meeting 20 people once a quarter in a room. We can consult with a hundred interested people or a thousand interested people just before we start doing something, as we're doing something"*

*and then afterwards ...we might still use the 20 people who we were getting together...but they'll be the people who are coordinating that."*

Another described plans to use the new methods deployed during the pandemic to embed throughout the union "*the principle of engaging as many members as possible as often as possible*". This pattern of adaptations inspiring further adaptation informs the paper's argument that renewal should be understood as a process of transition.

### ***Recruitment and retention***

As noted above, union membership in the UK rose by 118,000 in 2020 (BEIS, 2021). Official statistics had not been published when the study was conducted but, as also noted earlier, participants in the research cited anecdotal evidence that their union was experiencing growth. 64% of survey respondents said they were aware that membership had increased since March 2020. With many traditional in-person recruitment activities in workplaces and education settings unable to take place, and due to the widely-shared expectation that members experiencing financial hardship may cancel their membership, participants described fearing that the pandemic would lead to membership decline and expressed satisfaction that the opposite appeared to be occurring. The study found evidence of organic membership growth but also that growth could be attributed to new initiatives to recruit and retain members.

Organic growth was attributed to two separate but related sources: people who joined because they sought protection, support and advice about threats to their employment and health related to the pandemic, and people who joined having seen unions defending and supporting their members during the pandemic. One official stated: "*Lots of people have joined because they have been impressed by the role the union has played in fighting for the industry*". Whilst unions would argue that defending members' jobs and interests is at the core of trade unionism and thus continuing to do so during the pandemic does not represent change, this does suggest that the cumulative effect of unions' work during the pandemic to support members in the ways shown in this paper contributed to membership growth.

Alongside organic growth, unions adapted their recruitment activities in ways that contributed to membership growth. This included investing in new online membership systems and upgrading existing systems (a response to nearly all new members joining online during the pandemic); organising virtual recruitment sessions for new starters in companies, and integrating membership systems with webinar registration to check if attendees were

members and prompt them to join if not. When over 25,000 trainee health professionals enrolled to work in the National Health Service (NHS), one health union introduced a new category of membership that was initially free for temporary entrants to the NHS workforce. The union also used the pandemic as an opportunity to remove up-front joining fees for all new members and to move to monthly payments. Unions also took action to retain members by introducing 'subscription holidays', providing hardship funds for members experiencing reduced incomes and contacting members who had left or fallen into arrears to encourage them to retain their membership or rejoin.

Despite participants in the research widely expressing satisfaction about expected membership growth, concerns were raised about membership-related challenges that their union may soon face. They included concern that the ending of furlough schemes may lead to the decline predicted at the start of the pandemic if members in hard-hit industries face redundancy, and concern that their union's subscription model and 'offer' may need to change, particularly if members who joined during the pandemic but find they aren't covered by a collective bargaining agreement subsequently question their membership's value. Such concerns indicate how despite adaptations to recruitment and retention activities there was awareness within unions that further adaptation was likely to be required both as the pandemic continued and post-pandemic.

### ***Training members and supporting workplace representatives***

Alongside membership growth participants also reported large numbers of members volunteering to become lay workplace representatives (reps), and that in particular a far higher number of members than usual had signed up to become health and safety reps. As one official noted, the pandemic meant workplace safety had become about "*keeping your colleagues safe, keeping yourself safe*". New reps required training and the changed circumstances of the pandemic meant new training courses and delivery methods were needed. With in-person training not possible, unions embraced online training using platforms such as Zoom, often for the first time. Recognising that existing in-person courses, often delivered in all-day residential settings, could not easily be replicated online, officials restructured existing courses and prepared brand new COVID-specific courses that through necessity were delivered immediately without being piloted or having gone through extensive consultation. One official stated:

*“I think it would have taken over two years to build confidence and pilot that through our structures had it not been for COVID. The fact we had to shut everything down meant we just had to do it. An electric shock to the system is actually a benefit.”*

Having adapted to online provision, officials widely shared the view that their union was unlikely to revert to wholly in-person training. There was also broad recognition that any internal resistance to online training had been removed due to the overwhelming evidence that it could work and that there was high demand for it. A union that had a large influx of new reps provided online training to 3500 members between March and July 2020. In a normal year they would expect to provide in-person training to 2200 members.

Social distancing and closed workplaces meant officials also developed new methods to support existing lay reps, many of whom faced higher caseloads yet were often physically isolated from the members they were supporting. Officials established WhatsApp groups for reps to receive peer-to-peer support and prioritised contacting reps through individual video or telephone calls. Officials reported that the pandemic was prompting broader reflection about how long-term support to reps is provided. One union leader explained that historically reps receive basic introductory training but subsequent training is limited. The experiences of their reps during the pandemic had encouraged them to introduce a new performance management system to provide reps with skills development opportunities tailored to their needs and expertise.

### ***Member representation***

Themes of rapid learning and of moving in-person activities online are also prominent when considering how unions represented members during the pandemic, both in collective representation through negotiations with employers, and when representing individual members in, for example, disciplinary and grievance processes.

As lockdowns began and workplaces closed, face-to-face negotiations with employers moved online and the issues being negotiated quickly changed. Organisers reported that negotiations already in progress, including for example, annual remuneration processes, were paused and talks quickly refocused on preventing redundancies but also on new issues such as securing furlough status for employees, agreeing homeworking arrangements and ensuring members had adequate PPE. Officials reported that their ability to negotiate effectively and often in a

highly time-critical fashion on these new issues was a direct result of engaging with members in the new ways described earlier to learn about the new situations being experienced.

Online negotiations are described as being more formal and taking longer than in-person negotiations, due to the loss of informal conversations that can take place at the sides of negotiations and due to participants finding it harder to 'read the room' and the body language of interlocutors when online. But negotiators learnt how to adapt such as by agreeing new online 'ground rules' with employers which included ensuring regular breaks are scheduled and secure break-out rooms provided. They also learnt that convening members to consult with them during negotiations can be much quicker when online video calls rather than in-person meetings are used and that often this led to higher member participation. Similarly, senior leaders such as general secretaries learnt that online negotiations make it easier and more time-efficient for them to join talks at critical stages from wherever they are rather than needing to travel to the location of in-person talks as would have been expected pre-pandemic.

Interviewees reported concern that once social distancing rules were relaxed enabling in-person talks to resume some employers may seek to maintain online negotiations. One official noted how online talks make it *"easier for employers to avoid meetings and not respond to electronic communication, dodge phone calls etc., ... previously [we] could turn up on doorstep/office"*. Yet, officials also noted that the advantages of online talks, as shown above, in some circumstances may encourage them to experiment with continuing online negotiations if that could lead to better outcomes for members.

### ***Advocacy and influencing***

Advocating for and with members is central to a union's work but when efforts to lobby and influence employers and policymakers are traditionally centred around face-to-face and mass interactions, the pandemic required adaptations to this work. The study found evidence of unions experimenting with new forms of campaign activities and reprioritising how lobbying work is organised.

Whilst some unions adapted mass participation activities such as rallies and demonstrations to fit the new circumstances of the pandemic, for example, by organising socially distanced rallies, most unions experimented by adopting new online campaign methods. These included virtual lobbies of politicians and rallies using video conferencing platforms which saw high

member participation. Unions bought targeted adverts to promote campaigns on social media platforms and used online campaign tools such as e-petitions and websites that enabled members to send emails to politicians and employers. Many of these tools were used by unions pre-pandemic but became more widely used when online campaigning took on greater importance. One official explained how their union was investing to upgrade their online campaign tools to better mobilise its “reserve lobbying army”. Decisions about which campaigns to organise were, in part, determined by the results of all-member surveys which, as described earlier, gave unions new and immediate insights about issues affecting members.

### ***Governance and democracy***

Much of the evidence presented so far reflects decisions taken by officials with delegated responsibility for specific industries, regions and workplaces. This section looks at changes to unions’ national governance arrangements during the pandemic, focusing on elected executives and conferences.

Whilst some internal meetings could be postponed, National Executive Committee (NEC) meetings, a key decision-making body within unions, could not. The resulting shift from in-person to online NEC meetings had implications for how they functioned and the decisions they took. One senior official described positively how online meetings led to NEC business being completed more quickly, in part because shorter meetings were scheduled but also due to a new expectation that papers would be read in advance. They expected their union to adopt a model of online and in-person NEC meetings post-pandemic. Less positively, a senior official in another union described how meeting online had led their NEC to become “increasingly risk averse” in its decision-making with implications for the “direction of travel of the trade union”. Several reasons were identified, namely that NEC members wanted to avoid confrontation when online; were less able to gain unconscious cues from other members and were unable to informally discuss business outside of the ‘formal’ online meeting. Adapting to this the union encouraged offline one-to-one conversations between NEC members and with union officials to take place to “bring back the informal chit-chat” and provide members with greater information in the hope this would encourage more questions and scrutiny of the business being considered.

Decision-making authority within unions also often rests with democratic conferences. As the pandemic began many conferences were postponed until 2021 but by autumn 2020 some

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unions were experimenting with online conferences. The study found evidence that holding online conferences was prompting reflection within unions about the purpose of conferences. Interviewees questioned whether traditional in-person conferences are an effective use of time and whether some functions such as procedural reports and debates could, or should, stay online after the pandemic.

### **‘We’re not going back to what we were’: capacity-building and transition**

The findings and analysis presented in this paper enables new contributions to the academic literature on union renewal to be made. The paper has presented evidence that makes a fresh case for why renewal should be understood as a process of transition: rapid changes made by unions to adapt to the new circumstances of the pandemic have led and are leading to further adaptations. Not all will be permanent, for example, the relaxation of social distancing rules will see some, but not all, in-person activities and office-based working return, but the research found a strong sense amongst officials that their union would not go back to its pre-pandemic model and that its future model was to be determined. Illustrating that sense of transition, one senior official stated that it was important unions now set out a positive vision for the future to show “*where we’re going after this.*” Moreover, interviewees described the need to evaluate recent changes to inform how they should meet future challenges. Whilst this need was not framed explicitly in terms of renewal, the view below, expressed by a general secretary, is indicative of this widely-shared perception:

*“we’re not going back to what we were, but nobody quite knows what the future will be. It’s really difficult to – and I think it’d be pointless trying to – offer all of the answers, but if you don’t ask the questions at this point then you will lose the opportunity because someone else will impose a solution on unions.”*

The paper further contributes by providing evidence that union renewal, in the form of membership growth, is possible in an economic downturn when unemployment rose (albeit, a far less steep rise than would have been experienced without the furlough scheme) and in a context of unfavourable institutional arrangements which, in the case of the UK, offer limited support to unions and deny them any significant role in policymaking. The introduction of the



furlough scheme, lobbied for and brokered by the TUC, showed an ability on the part of unions to rapidly innovate to develop new policy solutions and to work with government to implement them, and demonstrated the political influence unions can have. The major role of unions in shaping the UK government's economic response to the pandemic suggests greater potential for new corporatist arrangements to be established post-pandemic may exist than might have been assumed pre-pandemic, both in terms of the flexibility of institutional arrangements for adaptation and greater willingness on the part of government and unions to work together constructively.

The furlough scheme's prevention of mass redundancies established a foundational narrative amongst unions about their role in the pandemic to protect jobs and save lives. The research observed how this narrative was a key factor underpinning the confidence and optimism that union officials expressed about the ability of the collective union movement to effect change and the ability of their union to support its members. As noted earlier, when asked to consider the strength of their union, 70% of survey respondents stated a belief that the union was stronger than before the pandemic. Respondents particularly attributed this to rising membership, to the breadth and speed of changes made by the union during the pandemic and to greater member engagement which had provided richer information about the circumstances facing members and enhanced capacity. The new evidence about these changes presented in the paper challenges the view of scholars (for example, Taylor, 2005) who have questioned unions' ability to reform. Further, the study found that the confidence amongst officials that reform had inspired was emboldening and motivating them to push for further reform. As such this paper argues that confidence, and the motivational effect it can have, should be considered as an important factor in understanding processes of renewal and a focus for further academic inquiry.

Murray's review of the literature on union renewal concludes that there are no easy answers but that through 'democratic experimentalism' new organisational forms, new types of collective action and 'renewed union vigour' will emerge (2017: 23). The evidence presented here supports that conclusion. He further argues that experimentalism requires the development of trade unionists' 'strategic capabilities'. The paper has shown that experimentation took place but does the study suggest the pandemic enhanced unions' strategic capabilities? Lévesque and Murray provide an analytical framework (2010) to assess the strategic capabilities and power resources that they argue are needed to build union capacity. Applying that framework allows us to address this question and to suggest that unions' responses to the pandemic have led to increased capacity.

Lévesque and Murray's framework outlines four strategic capabilities (intermediation, framing, articulation and learning) needed for unions to use their power resources and build capacity. Of the four, the study found strongest evidence, as shown throughout this paper, that unions are seeking to learn from the changes made during the pandemic to inform further short and long-term adaptations. The evidence is less clear that unions are yet putting this learning into practice to frame and articulate new proactive agendas and then to intermediate between actors and within networks to realise them. However, the recognition amongst officials about the need to develop a new positive vision demonstrates an awareness about the importance of utilising their learning to develop each of the other strategic capabilities.

Turning to the four power resources in the framework (internal solidarity, network embeddedness, narrative resources and infrastructural resources), the evidence is far stronger, the most compelling of which relates to infrastructural resources. The view that the human resources of union officials - paid staff and lay reps - went above and beyond to work in new ways and to marshal material resources creatively runs through the study, and is evidenced by their rapid adoption of new digital tools and adaptation to remote working. New narrative resources were developed centred upon the furlough scheme and which are broadly summarised in the view of one general secretary that when the crisis hit, "*we were there for the members*". Related to this, internal solidarity was fostered through the use of new tools and methods to engage with members and by the greater engagement this enabled. Evidence of enhanced network embeddedness - links to other unions and organisations with shared values - is less evident; a factor that can perhaps be attributed to the sense that whilst remote working tools can be highly effective for internal communication, their utility to forge new external connections is more limited.

This analysis of unions' strategic capabilities and power resources indicates that the responses of unions to the pandemic have led to increased union capacity. It thus provides new insights that aid our understanding of how unions respond to crisis and of processes of renewal.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown how unions responded to the pandemic by making significant and rapid changes to how they operate. New forms of engagement, training, recruitment, representation

and campaigning were developed with widespread adaptation to remote working and adoption of digital tools. In the UK this has led to membership growth, more workplace representatives and greater levels of member engagement; outcomes that are indicative of union renewal. The paper has presented new empirical evidence to make a new case for understanding union renewal as a process of transition and argued that the changes made by unions increased union capacity. The extent to which the changes made will be permanent is unknown but the evidence suggests unions are unlikely to revert to their pre-pandemic model, and moreover that further change is likely to be needed to adapt to a new world of work still being shaped by the consequences of the pandemic. The paper has shown an ability by unions to innovate to rapidly change how they work and to shape public policy, thus challenging their critics and a narrative of long-term, even terminal, decline. The challenge for unions now will be to learn from a period of changes made through necessity to strategically develop a new confident narrative about their role in a new post-pandemic settlement and in new processes of social dialogue. Achieving this could enable further renewal and would contribute new insights for understanding how unions adapt and renew.

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